

Australian educators endorse fight for educator rank-and-file safety committees

Committee for Public Education
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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia recently held a successful online meeting to discuss the development of a global movement to stop schools reopening under conditions of rising Delta variant infections.

Reports by speakers—Patrick O’Connor from Australia, Prageeth Aravinda from Sri Lanka and Zac Corrigan from the US—provoked a wide-ranging discussion from more than 100 people who attended across Australia and internationally.

Educators and their supporters passed the following resolution: “This meeting of the Committee for Public Education sends solidarity greetings to striking teachers in Sri Lanka, to educators, students and parents in the US, and to others internationally who are opposing the reckless and homicidal policies of reopening schools. We pledge to take forward the fight for rank-and-file educator committees in Australia, linking up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.”

Following the meeting the CFPE interviewed several teachers, a student and retired educators who endorsed the resolution calling for rank-and-file safety committees.

Alistair, a primary school teacher, emphasised the importance of an international perspective to fight the pandemic:

“It’s really good to hear from ordinary people around the world: how COVID is impacting on them, what they’re doing to combat the actions of governments, and how they are trying to take the power back into their own hands to create change.

“We know kids are going to be affected by COVID but we don’t know what the long-term impacts are going to be. It’s sad to hear that America is almost a test case for what’s going to happen to kids. It sounds like they’re prepared to test Covid on kids, to see what the impacts are. The government is looking at schools as being just childcare so parents can work.

“Last year, during a Melbourne lockdown, the union didn’t even tell us our rights as teachers. The day after the lockdown was announced, we were sent back into school, on

site to prepare for online learning. That’s not a lockdown. If businesses are at home why are teachers at school? We got no support from the union.

“The international alliance of rank-and-file committees, to oppose the reopening of schools, is the only way we are going to be able to solve this problem. We can’t rely on governments or education departments to actually make the decisions in our favour. We have to take it into our own hands. It is not going to start from the top, it has to start at the grassroots, in the schools.”

Amanda, a primary school teacher, commented:

“I’ve been counting the Victorian school closures due to infections and so far, my count is about 36. That’s under conditions where so few kids are going to school, while the majority are on remote learning. The government is talking about opening up again—clearly that’s going to be a huge issue. They say they are getting high school kids vaccinated, but in the primary schools, kids under 12 will not be vaccinated.

“All the union is doing is pushing the government agenda about getting teachers vaccinated. But they aren’t addressing the idea of schools opening up. Vaccinations alone will not stop students and teachers being infected. It’s all about getting schools back, to open up the economy for profit. Last year the union celebrated schools opening up when it wasn’t safe to do so and then there was a massive growth in school outbreaks. I can’t see them doing any different now.

“I agree it has to come from the ground up, rank-and-file committees. It must be international. The whole drive to open up only works if the world is working together and eradicating it. I don’t think that can happen in individual countries alone, it has to happen worldwide.”

Adrian, a university student, said:

“The CFPE meeting was clear, and contrasted with what the government puts forward, such as the lies that the schools are safe.

“We know children do catch and transmit the virus. I’ve heard of children in the US, as young as a few years old,

dying of COVID. Even if that's a rare occurrence, it obviously that means they can catch it, can get seriously ill on occasion, and even the ones who survive it and don't get seriously ill, you hear of people having long term health effects. If COVID interacts with the brain, that could have effects that no one even knows about in young children.

"The government benefits from people taking COVID less seriously, saying it is supposedly not as bad as some people are making it sound. They say, 'Your kids are fine.'

"If people are not desperately worried about their kids, they're less likely to be as militantly opposed to the lifting of restrictions. If you think your kids are okay, you are more likely to accept 'living with the virus.' The government is pushing in-person exams for year 12 students, to maintain an illusion that everything is fine and going ahead as planned.

"I was excited when I heard at the May Day Rally earlier this year, the call for the formation of an international alliance of workers' rank-and-file committees. This is a great idea. There is real potential for teachers to take forward this struggle."

Carmel, a retired primary school teacher, stated:

"There is so much happening with COVID and the state of education in the world. I think that the whole thing is on the brink of some kind of revolution. Patrick, in his speech, described what is happening as 'social murder.' I find that whole thing worrying.

"What intrigued me was the argument that Zac Corrigan put out about eradication, and how we can achieve that. That was very interesting for me. I can't see that governments are going to do it. At the end of the day, it's all about the dollar. We need feet on the ground and we need a voice. The union doesn't exist as far as I'm concerned. They've become another arm of the government. I saw that when I reached out to the union for them to support me when I was named in excess at my school. They told me to use all my leave entitlements. That was their solution: 'Leave the job that you love and go quietly.'

"Rank-and-file committees have to be international. We all have to be on the same page. We are all experiencing the same thing in each part of the world. We need to have solidarity going forward and share the journey together, because it can't be done in isolation."

Campbell, a secondary teacher, said:

"The CFPE meeting cut through government misinformation and bias with clear and thoughtful data, objective analysis, and reporting from across the globe.

"Governments everywhere are openly embracing the ideology of having to 'live with the virus.' What this points to is that governments, following the dictates of the corporate and industrial elite, are openly and nakedly showing the contempt they have for the health and safety of

all working people. It's profit over lives.

"What is constant is union complicity in mouthing the same deadly mantra that governments give the population as a whole. Unions have now become the policing agents of capital and have ceased any progressive role in representing their members.

"It is a brazen lie that children are safe from COVID. Globally, a larger and larger proportion of those getting the virus, particularly the Delta strain, are aged under 20. It is interesting to note that a growing percentage of parents refuse to allow their children back into schools—for instance in the UK and the USA—as they have seen through this vicious assault on their family's safety.

"The pandemic has certainly shown the cruel face of capitalism. Workers need to develop their own democratic committees outside of the traditional union movement to unify with an international alliance of workers."

Rick, a retired secondary teacher, said:

"I was particularly taken with the statement by Zac Corrigan that there is 'an impending disaster of monumental proportions.' As a retired teacher, I can feel the dread that must be sinking in to the more aware members of the profession, the sense that they are regarded as dispensable in a terrible psychopathic gamble.

"As a grandparent, I have a burning anger that children are going to be sacrificed so that the rich can maintain and increase their useless wealth, as they are in the southern states of the US. The description of 'opening up' demands as 'social murder' is entirely justified.

"The film clip of Biden talking down and lying to a child about COVID was chilling and disgusting. He personified the horror of his class.

"I was fascinated by the report of the struggle going on in Sri Lanka and support the striking teachers there, and all teachers who are opposing the homicidal reopening of schools. Rank-and-file committees are the best strategy to take forward the national and international struggle of educators."

The CFPE urges all educators and students to contact us to discuss these life and death issues.

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